

Allotment: getting started

Finding an allotment and readying it for cultivation can seem a daunting task, but with these simple steps a productive plot is easier than you might think.

Quick facts

Suitable for All allotments

Timing Clear plots in winter ready for spring sowing

Difficulty Easy

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Suitable for...

While it is exciting taking on a new allotment, it can also be very daunting, especially if you inherit a neglected, overgrown plot. Before you take on a plot, check out the following factors:

- A full allotment plot is 10 rods (approximately 250 sq m/300 sq yd), but half plots are usually available if this is too much to manage
- Most, but not all, sites have water; but check what other facilities are available, such as storage sheds, compost and toilets
- Check also if there are any limitations in the lease which, for instance, prevents fruit tree planting or the erection of structures such as greenhouses, polytunnels or sheds, and if there are problems such as theft and vandalism
- Popular sites may have a waiting list, but sometimes it is better to be on a waiting list for a good, well-tended plot, than inherit a weedy, overgrown plot on another site

When to start your allotment

If cleared by early spring, in time for early planting and sowing, a plot can give its full potential from the outset.

In cases of severe neglect this won't be possible. If this is the case, make a realistic plan of what you can achieve in year one, year two and so on. It might be better to clear half the plot in the first year, then at least you can start growing.

How to start your allotment

Clearing your plot

- Clear the plot of unwanted materials and debris. You may be able to get help with this from the allotment management team
- Trees, shrubs and other woody plants such as [brambles](#) are best cut down and dug out; woody waste can be [shredded and composted](#)
- Vegetation can be buried during digging after removing the roots of perennial weeds such as [bindweed](#), [couch grass](#), [ground elder](#) and [nettles](#). Do not compost these
- [Smothering weeds](#) with opaque mulches (carpet is no longer recommended) requires at least one growing season to work well. This can be an effective way of dealing with parts of a plot that are not intended to be planted for that season (it's easy to overdo it with a new allotment so take your time and don't worry if it takes several seasons to fully bring an overgrown plot into cultivation)
- Limited use of a weedkiller might be worth considering on more challenging plots, for example [a stumpkiller](#) might be used where woody stumps cannot be readily removed. And where the deep-rooted pernicious weed [horsetail](#) is present, repeated use of a non-residual systemic weedkiller based on glyphosate applied from mid-spring until mid-autumn should help knock it back (though it is unlikely to eliminate the problem)
- Gardeners wishing to grow [organically](#) should employ [non-chemical weed control](#) measures only

Working your plot

- When clear of weeds the [soil can be broken up](#) and ideally add organic matter by digging or rotovating, or while building [raised beds](#)
- Take a soil test to find out the [soil pH](#) and whether it is lacking in any nutrients. This will help plan any [lime](#) or fertiliser application
- Outfit the plot with compost bins, a shed and other useful items

Now you are ready to start planting! Make sure you make a [crop rotation](#) plan to get the best from your plot.

A shady plot

Ideally your new allotment will be in a sunny position but this, inevitably, is not always the case. If you have been given a plot which is partly or totally in shade, choosing fruit and vegetables that tolerant these conditions is essential.

Fruit in shade

Redcurrants, whitecurrants and gooseberries, as well as fruit such as raspberries, blackcurrants and rhubarb which originate from woodland edges will produce reasonable crops in some shade.

Apples, pears and plums prefer a more open position, but cooking apples can tolerate a partially shaded position. 'Morello' cherries are also productive on a shady wall.

Vegetables in shade

Beetroot, chard, kale, kohlrabi and lettuce are all relatively tolerant of some shade, but sowing seeds in modules in bright conditions and then transplanting will get them off to an early start with an established root system.

Problems

Soil pests and diseases can be troublesome on new allotments. Ones to watch out for include [clubroot](#) and [onion white rot](#).

See also...

[Chemicals: storing and disposing safely](#)

[Chemicals: using a sprayer](#)

[Chemicals: using safely and effectively](#)

[Green manuring](#)

[National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners](#)

[RHS soil analysis service](#)

[Slugs](#)

[Vegetables for exhibition](#)

[Weeds: non-chemical control](#)

[Wireworms](#)

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